

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S

mystery magazine

CONTENTS

NOVELETTE

- THE OPERATOR *by Jack Ritchie* 103

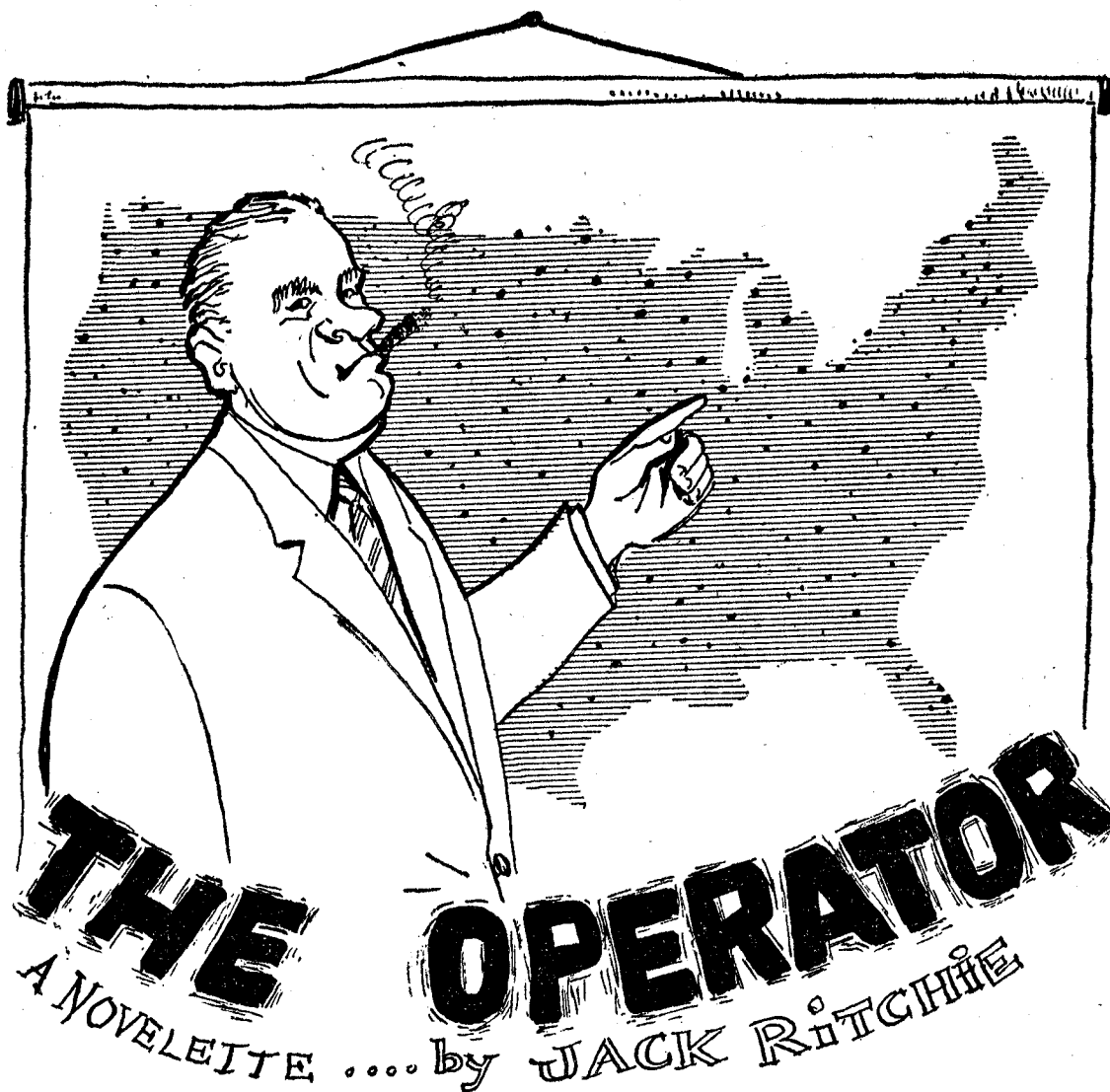
SHORT STORIES

- THE ETHICAL ASSASSINATION *by Frank Sisk* 2
- MAKE NO MISTAKE *by Leo R. Ellis* 15
- THE LONG WAY AROUND *by Jean S. Brockington* 23
- THE IMMORTALS *by Donald Honig* 38
- NEVER TRUST AN ANCESTOR *by Michael Zuroy* 43
- THE CEMETERY MAN *by C. B. Gilford* 60
- FLIGHT #27 *by Carl Marcus* 72
- SETTLEMENT OUT OF COURT *by Fletcher Flora* 78
- THE MANNEQUIN *by Bryce Walton* 87

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INSIDE the police station, I found the Motor Vehicle Section and approached the sergeant.

He took his time about going through some papers on his desk, but finally he looked up. "Well?"

I cleared my throat. "I'd like to report the theft of an automobile."

He yawned, opened a desk drawer, and reached for some forms.

"It was a 1963 Buick," I said.

This could be called the two faces of Hagen . . . a resourceful fellow who courted crime by day and death by night.

"Four door. The body is dark green and the top cream."

He looked up. "Buick?"

"Yes. I parked it on the bluff above the lake, on Lincoln Drive. I just got out for a minute or two and walked around. When I came back, it was gone."

"The license number?"

I rubbed the back of my neck for a moment. "Oh, yes. E 20-256."

He looked at the civilian clerk at the next desk. They both grinned.

"As soon as I found that my car was gone," I said. "I flagged down a taxi and came here. This is the right place to report this, isn't it?"

"Yeah. It's the right place." He turned to the clerk. "Fred."

Fred left his desk and came over. He had a slip of paper in his hand.

The sergeant glanced at it and then looked up again. "Let's see your ignition keys."

"Ignition keys?" I reached into my right trouser pocket. Then I tried my left. I began patting my other pockets. Finally I smiled sheepishly. "I guess I must have lost them."

"No, mister. You didn't *lose* them." His face lost the grin. "Don't you know that it's against the law to leave your ignition keys in an unlocked car?"

I shifted uneasily. "But I was gone for just a minute."

"You were gone a lot longer than

that, mister. The boys in the squad even took the trouble to look for you. They couldn't find you any place around there."

I frowned. "The boys in the squad?"

"That's right. They waited fifteen minutes and then one of them had to drive the car away."

"A *policeman* took my car?"

"He didn't steal it. If that's what you mean. He just took it to the police garage for your own protection." His eyes became cold. "Mister, did you know that in eighty percent of automobile thefts, the owner left his keys in the ignition?"

"Well . . . I guess I read something about that, but. . ."

"No buts," he snapped. "It's people like you who make it possible for the punks to steal cars."

I bristled. "Wouldn't it have been simpler just to lock the car and take the ignition keys? And maybe leave a note under the windshield wiper?"

"Sure it would be simpler, but it wouldn't teach people like you anything. But *this* you'll remember." He seemed to relent a little. "It's just your tough luck, mister. We've got orders to crack down this week and haul away any car if we can't find the owner. You should have read about it in the papers." He reached into another drawer this

time and came out with a smaller form. "Like I said, it's against the law to leave your keys in the ignition. The fine is twenty-five dollars."

"*Twenty-five* dollars?"

"You can pay right here or take it to court. So far that's never done anybody any good. Just adds twelve dollars and ten cents to the tariff. That's costs."

I exhaled slowly. "I'll pay here." I took out my wallet and put two tens and a five on his desk.

"Let's see your driver's license."

I put the wallet on the desk in front of him.

He filled out the form, shoved it toward me, and pointed. "Sign there."

I signed. "Where can I pick up the car?"

He tore off the stub along the perforated line and handed it to me. "Your receipt. Show that to the sergeant in the basement garage. He'll let you have your car and keys."

Seven minutes later I drove out of the garage.

It was a clean car and handled nicely.

I wondered who it belonged to.

Earlier that morning, I had parked my car where the Lincoln Driveway arched down to the lake front.

It had been cool and only a scat-

tering of cars were parked along the drive. I lit a cigarette and walked easy, taking in the automobiles I passed. Some of them were occupied and the empty ones appeared to be locked.

And then I came to the 1963 Buick. It was parked two hundred yards from the nearest other car and the keys were in the ignition.

I investigated the paths near the car and saw no one. At the bluff's edge. I looked down.

A man and a woman strolled along the beach far below and it seemed like a good bet that they belonged to the Buick. Even if they started back up right now, it would take them fifteen minutes to get up the twisting path to the top.

I walked back toward the Buick and was almost there when I saw the squad car parked behind it.

Both cops were out of their car. The taller one glanced my way. "Your car, Mister?"

"No. But I wish it was." I kept walking and got back to my car ten minutes later.

I looked back down the long drive. One of the cops was still at the Buick, but the other had disappeared.

I watched. Five minutes later the tall cop reappeared. I guessed that he'd been looking for the owner of the Buick and hadn't found

him down there on the beach.

He got into the Buick and pulled away. The squad car followed.

I turned on my ignition and kept about two blocks behind them. They took the Buick to the downtown police headquarters and it disappeared into the basement garage.

I parked my car and slowly smoked a cigarette. The tall cop finally came out of the basement drive and got back into the squad car. It drove away.

I thought it over and then grinned. I opened my glove compartment and took out the wallet that had once belonged to somebody named Charles Janik.

I got out of the car and went into the police station.

I drove the Buick the half mile to Joe's Garage and he opened the doors when I blew the horn. I eased the car to the pair of doors at the rear of the shop and into the room no legitimate customer of Joe's ever saw.

In twenty-four hours the Buick would have a different paint job, the motor block number would be changed, and it would leave here with a new set of license plates. By tomorrow afternoon it would be across the state line and on a used car lot.

Joe closed the doors behind us and looked the car over. "Nice buggy."

I nodded. "Cost me twenty-five dollars."

He didn't get that. "Where did you pick it up?"

I grinned. "You'll probably read about it in the papers this afternoon."

We went into his office.

"I'll phone in," Joe said. "You should get your money in the mail tomorrow."

"Have it sent to the Hotel Meredith in St. Louis."

"Taking a vacation?"

"You might say that."

But it was more than a vacation. After what I'd just done, every cop in the city would have a complete description of me down to the last button.

I phoned for a taxi and took it back to where I'd parked my own car.

At my apartment I packed a suitcase and then drove to St. Louis. The trip took three hours and I checked in at the Meredith at two-thirty in the afternoon.

The clerk swiveled the register back so he could read my name. "How long are you staying, Mr. Hagen?"

"I don't know. It all depends."

Maybe I would stay three or four weeks before I thought it was cool

enough to go back. Or maybe I wouldn't have to go back at all—if I got the telephone call I was hoping for.

The story got into the St. Louis evening papers, all about the man who walked into a police station and stole a car. The newspapers seemed to think it was hilarious, but the police didn't, especially not the sergeant I'd talked to. He had been suspended.

I stuck to my room and the phone call came the next afternoon. It was a voice I'd never heard before.

"Hagen?"

"That's right."

He wanted to be a little more sure he had the right party. "Joe says we owe you some money for the last errand."

"Send it here."

He seemed to relax. "I see you got into the papers."

"Not my picture."

He laughed slightly. "Some people would give a lot to have it."

I waited, because I didn't think he had called just to congratulate me.

"The man in Trevor Park wants to talk to you," he said. "You know who I mean?"

"I know."

"Eight tonight." He hung up.

I got to the main gates of Trevor Park at about seven-thirty.

You couldn't call Trevor Park a town. It had no stores or gas stations and the big houses were far apart and not even numbered. But it was a place of trees and acres and money. It had its walking guards to keep the ordinary people out and a private police force to help them.

The cop at the gate came to my window.

"Hagen," I said.

He checked the clipboard he carried and nodded. "Mr. Magnus is expecting you."

"Which is his place?"

"The fourth one on your right."

The fourth one on my right didn't come up until half a mile later. There was another gate at the entrance, but it was open. Another two hundred yards brought me to a circle driveway in front of a three-story Norman.

Eventually I found myself in a large study facing two men.

Mac Magnus was big and gray-ing at the temples. Looking at him you would have thought he was born to the clothes he wore. He was that far away from where he had started.

The other man was tall and thin, with shrewd gray eyes, and when he spoke I recognized his voice as that I'd heard on the phone. His name was Tyler.

We got drinks served on a tray

and Magnus looked me over. "Did you read about yourself?"

"In St. Louis. Page three."

He indicated some newspapers on the desk. "You did better than that locally."

I walked over and glanced down. The front page, bottom. There was a picture of the unhappy sergeant too, but I didn't think he would save it for his scrapbook.

When I looked up, Magnus was still studying me.

"I suppose you know you cut your own throat," he said.

I shrugged.

"You'll never be able to go back. At least, not for a long time. Right now if you passed even a rookie patrolman, he'd look you over sharp and wonder if he should have a talk with you."

I sipped my drink. "There are other cities."

Tyler spoke now. "Hagen, just why did you take a chance like that in the first place?"

"I just wondered if it could be done. And so I tried."

But that hadn't been the real reason. I stole the Buick in the way I did because I wanted someone up high to notice me. I didn't want to be doing nothing but stealing cars the rest of my life.

Magnus glanced at Tyler. "I still think it was a fool thing to do."

"Maybe," I said.

My eyes went around the room, taking in the expensive furnishings. "The car racket must be good, if you can afford all this."

Magnus laughed softly. "Not that good, Hagen. But I'm like a supermarket. I got all departments. The canned goods, the fresh vegetables, the meat counters, the frozen foods. Hot cars is just a little counter somewhere in the back of the store."

But I had known that too. Magnus had his finger in everything that paid. He *was* everything. He was on the top, and safe.

Magnus looked at Tyler. "He's got your okay?"

Tyler nodded.

Magnus went to the map on the wall and pointed. "Ever been there?"

I looked at the dot. "No."

"It's a medium-type city of about two hundred thousand. I don't have a big operation there, but I want you to report to Sam Bernardi."

"I go to work for him?"

"No. You replace him."

"You don't like him any more?"

Magnus selected a cigar from a humidor. "Don't get any movie ideas, Hagen. Sam's sixty-five and worried about his ulcers. He wants to retire to one of those colonies in Florida and play golf all day." He lit the cigar. "Like I said, Hagen,

it's not a a big operation, so don't get excited. And you can thank Tyler for the promotion. He seems to think you got something—nerve, maybe—but as far as I'm concerned you're still only a second lieutenant, and that's way down on the ladder."

I decided to find out just where Tyler stood in the organization. "Tyler's second-in-command?"

Magnus laughed. "There *is* no second-in-command. You might say that Tyler's my Personnel and Recruitment Officer. And that's only for the operating personnel. Not the bookkeepers. He's got his job and I don't want him to know any more than that."

I reported to Sam Binardi the next day.

Sam was a small, florid man with nervous gestures, and his office was on the second floor of a toy factory.

He shook hands. "Tyler phoned. Said you were taking over." He indicated a cabinet. "If you want a drink, help yourself. I don't drink myself. Bad for the stomach."

"Later, maybe."

He looked me over. "They're sending them up young these days. I been in this business forty years—thirty before I got to sit behind this desk." He sighed and looked at some papers. "Well, let's get at it. We've got ninety-six people on the

payroll, and they're all good men."

"Counting the toy factory?"

"No. That's legitimate. Thirty-two employees. Mr. Swenson is the supervisor." He looked down at the papers again. "The real business is organized into four divisions. D-1. That's all the gambling, including the bookies. D-2. Junk. Riordan in charge. He's not hooked himself, so you can depend on him. D-3. Mable Turley. The girls like her. And D-4. Cars."

"What do I do? Just sit here?"

"Most of the time. There's the toy factory to consider too. That'll keep you busy a couple of hours a day." He beamed. "We cleared twenty-eight thousand last year. Mostly because of the Dottie Dee dolls. Ever see one?"

"No."

"I'll show you around the factory later." He got up and went to the city map on the wall. "This is our territory. Everything north of the river, including the suburbs."

I looked at the map. The river divided the city into two almost equal sections. "What about the south side of the city?"

Binardi shook his head. "We leave that alone. That's Ed Willkie's territory. We mind our business and he minds his. That way we got no trouble." He came back to the desk. "We got a treaty like.

There's no sense in fighting. I play golf with Ed twice a week."

He sat down. "I'll be in every day for about a month to break you in."

I phoned Captain Parker and we arranged a meeting at the Lyson Motel just outside of Reedville.

Walt Parker listened to what I had to say and then grinned. "So it was you who stole the car?"

"I had to get attention from the right people some way. This fell into my lap."

Parker agreed. "You could be stealing cars for twenty years and maybe never got noticed by Magnus. You got away with five cars so far?"

"Including the Buick."

He nodded. "They ship them to a place called Karl's Used Cars in Hainsford. Just across the state line. We could clamp down, but there's no point to that now. We're after bigger things. So we dip into the fund, buy up the cars for real, and store them in the garage for now. After this is all over, we'll make the adjustment with the owners or their insurance companies."

"Pretty rough on the fund."

"If this all works out, everyone will forgive us."

"What about the sergeant?"

"In a way he's got it coming, considering how he let you get away with what you did. But we'll pass the word to the chief and it won't be too hard on him."

Parker sat down on one of the beds. "So now you're a second lieutenant in the operation."

"It's still a long way from the top. Magnus won't be handing me any secrets for some time yet."

"At least it's a toe hold. Magnus has got himself a great big organization. I wouldn't be surprised if it covered every one of the fifty states and Puerto Rico for frosting. And this isn't the type of operation where you can carry the bookkeeping under your hat or in a little black notebook. There's *got* to be a central bookkeeping headquarters and we're out to find it. It's the only way we can really nail Magnus."

Parker lit a cigar. "We know how Magnus runs the operation. Take Binardi's, for instance—it's just like any of the hundreds of others Magnus controls. Once every month Magnus has a crew come in to microfilm Binardi's books. The film is mailed to a box number. Somebody picks it up and mails it somewhere else. Maybe it goes through five or six hands before it reaches that bookkeeping headquarters. But Magnus has so many safeguards on the way that

we've never been able to follow the mail all the way through.

"And when the film gets to headquarters, half a dozen or more trusted accountants get to work on it—and the hundreds of others like it—and Magnus gets to know how much he made and where and when and by whom.

"Magnus' empire is like a head of hair. We can snip off a little here and there—maybe even give him a crew cut—but the roots are still there. We've got to get at those roots, and our best bet is to find out where in these whole blessed United States he's hidden that bookkeeping headquarters."

After a month, Sam Binardi left for Florida, and I was left to play golf with Ed Willkie on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons.

Willkie was in his fifties, tanned, and played in the eighties. His wife was dead, but he had a twelve-year-old son named Ted.

I learned that Willkie's organization was long-established and conservative. Everybody waited patiently for his promotion. There was no idea of mutiny. Everyone took his orders from Boss Willkie and didn't feel frustrated about it.

On a Tuesday afternoon, two months later, when I pulled up in front of Willkie's house, I noticed

Ted duck back behind the garage.

I was about to ring Willkie's doorbell, but then I changed my mind. I went to the garage and found Ted hiding behind it. "Aren't you supposed to be in school?"

He glanced uneasily toward the house. "There's no school today."



"On a Tuesday?"

He didn't meet my eyes. "Well . . . I didn't feel so good. So I stayed home."

"But your father doesn't know that?"

Ted didn't say anything.

"Do you play hookey a lot?"

"You're not going to tell my father?"

"No. I never cared much for school myself. How do you get away with skipping school?"

He grinned. "I write the excuses and sign Dad's name."

"What do you do when you skip

school? You go somewhere special?"

His eyes brightened. "Mostly I go down to the lake and watch the boats. They have races almost every day now. There's a big one Thursday afternoon."

"And I suppose you'll be there?"

He grinned. "I guess so."

I went back to the front door and pressed the button. Willkie and I drove to the Wildwood course. He shot an 82 and I came in with a 76.

The next morning I left the office for an inspection trip of my territory. I found the two big men I thought I could use and had them report to my office in the afternoon.

I came right to the point. "I've got a little job for you."

They looked at each other a little uneasily. "Job?"

"It's about the simplest thing you've ever done in your lives. I just want you to sit on the back seat of my car. I'm going to pick up Ed Willkie tomorrow afternoon. I'll drive the three of you a couple of blocks, and then I want you to get out. Go back to work and forget everything."

They looked at each other again and then the bigger one spoke. "Just that? Nothing else?"

"Nothing else."

"I don't get it."

"You're not supposed to. Just do as you're told."

He had one more question. "You don't expect us to do any rough stuff? I mean . . . well . . . those days are gone. I got a wife and . . ."

"No rough stuff. Nothing but what I told you. I'll pick both of you up at noon on the corner of 6th and Wells."

At noon Thursday I packed my golf bag in the trunk of the car and stopped at 6th and Wells. We drove on to Ed Willkie's big house and I honked the horn.

Willkie came down the walk carrying his golf clubs. He opened the car door. "A foursome today?"

"No," I said. "Just giving them a lift."

I drove two blocks and then pulled to the curb. The two men got out of the back seat.

When I pulled back into traffic, Willkie said, "Who were they?"

"Just a couple of friends from Chicago."

After the eighteenth hole, Willkie and I went to the clubhouse. We got some cokes and sandwiches at the counter and took a table near the window overlooking the first tee.

I glanced at my watch. "As soon as you're through eating, Ed, you'd better call a meeting of your division heads."

Willkie took a bite of his sandwich. "Why?"

"I want you to make the announcement that you're retiring because of your health. And you're appointing me to take your place."

His eyes narrowed. "You're crazy."

"No. You'll make that announcement if you ever want to see your son alive again."

He stared at me unbelievably.

I smiled. "Remember those two nice men who were in the car when I picked you up? They've got your son by now." I tried my sandwich. "He's perfectly safe, Willkie. And he will be. As long as you do what I say."

He glared at me for thirty seconds and then rose abruptly. He strode to the telephone booth. I followed and kept him from closing the door. "I'll listen. I wouldn't want you to say anything rash."

I watched him dial his home number. He got his housekeeper, Mrs. Porter.

"Amy," he said. "Is Ted there?"

"Why, no, Mr. Willkie. He came home for lunch and then went back to school."

Willkie hung up and began paging through the phone book. I watched his finger run down the list of public schools. He dialed the number of Stevenson Grade and got the principal. "This is Edward Willkie. Is my son, Ted, in his class?"

It took about ten minutes for the principal to get the information. "No, he isn't, Mr. Willkie. And I've been meaning to speak to you about the number of times . . ."

I touched the hook on the side of the telephone and disconnected us. "Are you satisfied, Willkie?"

His face was gray. "I want to speak to Ted. I want to be sure he's all right."

"I can't accommodate you, Ed. I don't know where they took him."

He didn't understand that.

"Self-preservation," I said. "If I knew, you might be able to beat it out of me. But this way it wouldn't do you any good."

I gave him another minute to think things over and then cracked down. "All right. Start phoning your division heads. Have them meet at your office."

By the time we got to his office on the third floor of a furniture factory, his chief lieutenants were waiting.

Willkie took a deep breath and made the announcement, and the reason for it. They seemed to believe him. He didn't look too healthy.

I watched their faces for signs of resentment over the fact that an outsider had been promoted over their heads. I didn't see any. If there were some, they kept it off

their faces. And possibly they were just specialists in their line. None of them ever really expected to get the number one position.

When they were gone, Willkie turned to me. "Now do I get my boy back?"

"Not for a week. You'll be gone at least that long yourself."

I drove him to the airport and explained things on the way. "You'll take the first plane out of here to Los Angeles. You'll stay there one week. At the end of that time you can come back and you'll get your son safe and sound. One week will give me enough time to consolidate everything here. By the time you come back you won't be able to do anything about anything." The smile left my face. "But if I were you, I wouldn't bother to come back at all. It might not be too healthy for either you or your son. Why not just send for him? I think he'll like California."

At the air terminal I bought him a non-stop ticket to L.A. and we walked to ramp 202. I glanced at the waiting passengers. They were all strangers to me, but I nodded to a heavy man whose luggage seemed to indicate that he collected hotel stickers. He nodded back, probably wondering who the hell I was.

I turned my back on him and spoke to Willkie. "See that big man

all wrapped up in the light tan coat?"

His eyes flicked that way. "The one you nodded to?"

"That's right. When you get to Los Angeles, I want you to follow him."

"Follow him?"

I nodded. "Check in at the same hotel he does. Stay there one whole week. He'll always be somewhere around to see that you do."

"He's one of your. . . .?"



"Don't talk to him. And don't try to buy him. He doesn't know any more than his part of the job. And remember, no phone calls to anyone. I don't want you arranging things behind my back. Remember, we've got your son. Don't even try phoning your home. If you do, I'll know about it. Mrs. Porter has orders to" I stopped and shrugged irritably as though I'd revealed something.

Willkie must have felt surrounded. He certainly looked that way.

Ten minutes later, I watched

him walk up the ramp and disappear into the plane. He was still wearing his billed golf cap and sports shirt. He looked small.

When the plane took off, I phoned Mrs. Porter and told her that Willkie would be gone for a week and not to worry. It was a business trip.

I expected a telephone call that night, but it didn't come until eight days later. Tyler told me to report to Magnus right away.

When I pulled into the circle drive in front of Magnus' house I noticed a dark-haired girl on the lawn near the lake. She had set up an easel and was painting. She gave me only a momentary glance and returned to her work.

Her picture was in the Mac Magnus file. Valerie Magnus. Twenty-three. His only child.

Tyler and Magnus were waiting for me in the study.

Magnus let me stand for a while and then he said, "I hear you took over the south side."

I nodded.

"That was eight days ago," Magnus said. "Why didn't you let me know?"

"I wanted to be sure the merger would take."

"Did it?"

"Willkie could come back today and I don't think anybody would listen to him."

Magnus went to the humidor. He took out a cigar, looked it over, and finally lit it. He walked to the TV set and tapped it with a knuckle. "If I turn this thing on I'll probably find somebody giving a spiel about soap. The talk will be that there's only one thing you're supposed to use when you do your washing. Soap. Don't use harsh detergents."

He tapped the set again. "And if I turn to another channel, I'll probably find somebody else pushing detergents. Detergents are the new, the modern thing. Don't use old-fashioned inefficient soaps."

I noticed that Tyler was smiling.

Magnus went on. "What most people don't know is that the *same* company . . . the *same* *syndicate* . . . manufactures the soap *and* the detergent. They really don't give a damn *which* you buy . . . as long as you buy one. The money all goes into the same pocket."

He waited for that to sink in and then he said. "Willkie works for me too."

I blinked. "Binardi didn't say anything to me about that."

"Binardi didn't *know* that. And Willkie doesn't know that Binardi worked for me either. I wanted it that way."

Tyler spoke. "Divide and rule. Empires are built that way."

Magnus held up a hand. "I don't

want one finger to know what the other's doing, but I want to control the hand." He took a deep puff of his cigar. "Tyler, I'm beginning to think that you made a mistake about Hagen."

Tyler rubbed his jaw. "Hagen, how many people helped you pull this off?"

"None." And I told them all about it.

Magnus was impressed in spite of himself. "Damn. You scared Willkie silly. He didn't do a thing but stay in that L.A. hotel for a week. When he got up enough nerve, finally, to phone his home, he found that his son hadn't been kidnapped at all. The next thing he did was to phone me." Magnus glared at me. "I told Willkie to come right back. And as for you, Hagen, I want you to get back to the north side and *stay* on the north side."

Tyler stepped forward. "I've been thinking, Mac. If Willkie scared that easy, maybe he's not the right man for the job."

"He was scared because of his kid," Magnus said.

"Sure. But he still shouldn't have waited eight days before he told us what happened to his organization. Do you want somebody like that working for you?"

Magnus worked on the idea for half a minute. "Tell Willkie he's

through. He should have reported."

Tyler nodded. "And as long as the district's consolidated, why not leave it that way?"

Magnus showed teeth. "And I suppose you mean leave Hagen in charge?"

"Why not? I'd say he can handle the job. He has been, as a matter of fact. And it would cut down on overhead."

Magnus looked as though his arm had been twisted, but he said, "All right, Hagen, you got it." Then he glowered. "But if you get any other fancy ideas, you'd better clear them with me *before* you do anything."

Outside the house, I stopped for a moment to watch Magnus' daughter. Her back was toward me and she was still at the easel. She was slim, but from the picture in the files, you could hardly call her pretty. I had the suspicion that she did a lot of painting mostly because there was nothing else to do with her time.

I wondered what kind of a part she played as Magnus' daughter. Did he try to keep her ignorant of what he was? It seemed almost impossible that she could fail to know about him. Maybe she knew a lot more than he thought.

It was tempting to walk over there, admire her painting, and introduce myself. But on the other

hand, I thought that if I were that direct, and Magnus heard about it, I'd be broken down to private.

And yet, it might pay to know her.

I went to the left rear wheel of my car and let the air out of the tire. The wind came off the lake and I didn't think she could hear the hiss.

I got the jack and handle from my trunk and made some noise doing it.

As I jacked up the car, I covertly glanced her way. She had turned and was watching.

When I pried off the hub cap, I allowed the iron to slip and strike my knuckles. I jerked to my feet, holding the fingers of my left hand. I walked stiffly in a circle, cursing softly. It hurt more than I had anticipated.

That brought her over. "Are you hurt?"

"No. I always dance this way."

She looked down at the jacked-up wheel. "I can get somebody to change that for you."

"Thanks. But I think I can manage as soon as my wound heals." I flexed the hand. "Nothing seems to be broken." I knelt down and began removing the bolts from the wheel. "Do you work here?"

"Would I be sitting on the lawn painting second-rate pictures if I did?"

"Why not? I imagine you'd get time off and all the free scenery you can eat. No reason why a maid can't paint."

"I'm Magnus' daughter."

"Oh," I said. I removed one bolt from the wheel. Then the next. And the next.

"You're still allowed to talk to me," she said acidly.

I shrugged, but still said nothing. I removed the fourth bolt.

She took an exasperated breath. "I suppose you work for my father?"

I nodded. The fifth bolt came off and I removed the wheel. I went to the trunk for the spare. She followed me. "You just don't talk to anybody at all? Is that it?"

I took the spare out of the trunk and when I straightened, we were eye to eye. I kept it that way for about ten seconds, then I smiled faintly. "Let me put it this way. You're country club and I'm corner tavern. Kismet."

"I am *not* country club. As a matter of fact, we've never even been invited to join the one in Trevor Park."

I grinned. "Why not just buy the place? Your father ought to be able to do that."

"Of course he could. But you just don't *do* things like that. You've got to be *asked*. It makes all the difference in the world."

"To you?" I was mildly curious.

"No. I really don't care much one way or the other. But it does bother Dad."

I rolled the wheel to the side of the car. "Why doesn't he just send the club a five thousand dollar gift. But make it anonymous."

"Anonymous? What good would that do?"

"The members of the board, or whoever runs the place, won't be able to send the money back, because they won't know who gave it to them. So they'll think, 'Well, now, that's nice, and we do need a new bar.' And they'll spend it."

I began tightening the bolts. "That's the first hook. A month later, your father ought to send another five thousand. Again anonymous. Keep that up for four or five months."

She was interested. "And then?"

"And then *stop* sending money. But by now they'll be accustomed to getting the money regularly. They'll be wondering how they ever got along without it. They've begun to depend on it. As a matter of fact, they wouldn't have started building that new swimming pool if they hadn't expected the dollar rain to continue."

I tapped the hubcap into place. "And then let it leak out that your Dad is the one who's been sending all that beautiful cash—out of

the goodness of his heart, and in the spirit of general neighborliness."

I looked up at her. "And so there'll be a meeting of the board, and nobody will say anything direct about money, but someone will clear his throat and say, 'Everybody in Trevor Park belongs to the country club, except Mr. Magnus. Now I was thinking, isn't that just a little inhospitable?'"

"And somebody else will say, 'After all, he's never been convicted of anything. There are just rumors. And this *is* America, isn't it? We shouldn't convict a man just on hearsay.'"

"And they'll all feel good, and American, and virtuous, and besides they still need another five thousand to finish that swimming pool. And the next thing you know a delegation will call on your father, and within another six months he'll be the chairman of the Memorial Day Dance Committee."

She grinned when I finished. "I'll be sure to tell Dad."

And don't forget to mention who gave you the idea, I thought. I put the spare in the trunk and wiped my hands on a rag. This time I looked at her longer, bolder. I grinned faintly. "I still wish you only worked here."

Then I got into my car and drove

away, not pausing to look back.

I thought I had played things just about right. I didn't press the situation, yet I thought that she would spend some time thinking about me.

After I told Captain Parker how I'd taken over Willkie's territory, he frowned. "But we know that both Binardi and Willkie worked for Magnus. It's in the files we gave you to study. You should have remembered that."

I grinned. "I did."

"Then why . . .?"

"Because it was time for me to get noticed again. To move up another notch. And I did just that."

Parker rubbed his jaw. "What did Magnus think about it?"

"He wasn't too happy at first, and maybe he's not enthusiastic now. But the point is that he was impressed."

Parker sighed. "You have a lot of luck."

"Maybe some. Tyler seems to think I've got possibilities. As a matter of fact, I might not have been able to make it if Tyler hadn't been on my side."

Parker still looked unhappy. "Why don't you let us know before you do any of these crazy things?"

"I never really *know* what I'm going to do next. I make plans and

wait for the situation. If it doesn't show up, I forget them. But if it does come up, I have to act fast."

Something else bothered Parker. "We can have you stealing cars, because we're working on a bigger thing. But this kidnapping. . . ."

"There wasn't any kidnapping."

"Not actually, I suppose, but still if Willkie had some other trade and could be in a position to complain, you'd get yourself into trouble we couldn't get you out of."

He took an envelope out of his pocket. "Your check. If you'll endorse it, I'll bank it for you."

I looked at it. One month's pay. Twenty years from now the figures probably wouldn't be much different.

I turned it over and signed my real name.

When I got back to the city, I had Willkie's chief clerk bring in the books. I went over them, hoping to find something wrong, something I could run to tell Magnus about and get another gold star in my record, but the books were clean.

I did notice something else though. Even if there were nothing wrong with the books, the handwriting had changed abruptly eighteen months ago.

I called the clerk back into the office and wanted to know why.

"That was when Fielding retired,

sir," he said. "And I took over the job. Is there anything wrong with the books?"

"No."

"Fielding was a very sick man, sir. His kidneys. You might say that he didn't exactly retire; he just wanted to spend his declining days in a warmer climate. California, sir."

"How is he getting along?"

The clerk sighed. "I received a letter from his wife last week. Fielding passed away."

When the clerk was gone, I lit a cigarette and mulled things over. What the hell, I thought finally, you can't hurt a dead man.

I studied Fielding's handwriting and for a while considered trying to imitate it. But I gave that up. I didn't think anybody was going to be comparing handwriting anyway.

I got some blank paper and copied two of the pages from the account books Fielding had filled out. I kept the items the same, but I changed the figures.

I folded the paper and rubbed it on the floor a few times. I wanted to make it look at least eighteen months old, but it wouldn't have to pass a laboratory test.

At one o'clock I made a call to Magnus' place in Trevor Park.

I got a formal voice. "This is the Magnus residence."

"Could I speak to Mr. Magnus?"

"He isn't here, sir. He won't be home until five. Do you wish to leave a message?"

"No." I hung up. Perhaps it was just as well Magnus wasn't in. While I was working on this, I might as well keep something else going too. And make it seem accidental.

I phoned the Magnus place again.

"The Magnus residence," the butler said again.

I hung up without saying a word. Five minutes later I called again and did the same thing.

Eventually the butler would get tired of picking up the phone and having no one to talk to. I thought he'd go to somebody and complain. And since Magnus wasn't there, it would be Valerie.

He must have been a patient man. It wasn't until twelve calls later that I finally heard Valerie's voice.

"Who is this?" she demanded.

"I'd like to speak to Mr. Magnus."

"Have you been phoning every five minutes and then hanging up?"

"Why, no. I just got to my office and" I stopped. "The voice is familiar. Is this the girl who paints?"

"Hagen? Pete Hagen?"

"I didn't think I left the name."

"You didn't. I asked Dad." She laughed lightly. "He sent the first five thousand to the country club. He liked the idea."

"Good. Can I talk to him?"

"He's not here right now."

"Tell him I'll be there around five."

"Now look, Pete . . . Hagen. Nobody just *says* that he's coming here. That much I know. You wait until . . ."

I hung up.

At a little after five, the patient butler showed me into the study once again. Tyler was with Magnus and they had evidently just returned from a golf course.

Magnus glowered, but held himself in until the butler closed the door. "Damn it, Hagen, nobody, *nobody* calls up and tells me he's coming here. If I want to see anybody here, *I'm* the one who does the inviting."

"I thought I ought to see you personally. I don't know how clear your phone line is."

He seemed to go along with that precaution, but he still wasn't happy. "All right. What is it?"

I took the sheets out of my pocket. "While I was going over Willkie's books, I found this. It must have slipped behind one of the shelves."

Magnus glanced at them. "So?"

"I checked these with the ledgers and found the right pages. The items are identical, but the figures are different. It looks like you were being taken, Magnus. For about five hundred a week."

He wouldn't believe that. "I have those books checked every month."

"There's nothing wrong with the books. The juggling takes place *before* the entries themselves are made."

He frowned. "Willkie?"

"No. A clerk Willkie used to have. Fielding. I compared the handwriting and it checks."

The name Fielding meant nothing to Magnus or Tyler. He was just another one of hundreds of clerks.

"I thought I'd let you know before I did anything about it," I said. "You told me you wanted things that way."

He studied me. "*You* want to do something about it?"

I nodded. "Fielding retired eighteen months ago. To California. But that isn't good enough for us. I think I'll take a trip out there."

Magnus waited.

"At least we'd have his hide," I said. "If not the money. We can't let anybody in the organization get away with something like this."

"And you'd take care of that little thing yourself?"

"Sure. But I wanted to clear it with you first."

Tyler looked worried and I thought he'd say something.

But Magnus laughed softly. "Thanks for volunteering. But all I need is Fielding's address. I've got a division that specializes in people like him."

And Magnus would arrange for Fielding to have visitors. But the visitors would discover that he had unfortunately died before they could see him.

But I had scored two points. For one, I could be trusted to keep the books honest. For another, so far as Magnus knew, I was willing to

commit murder for the organization.

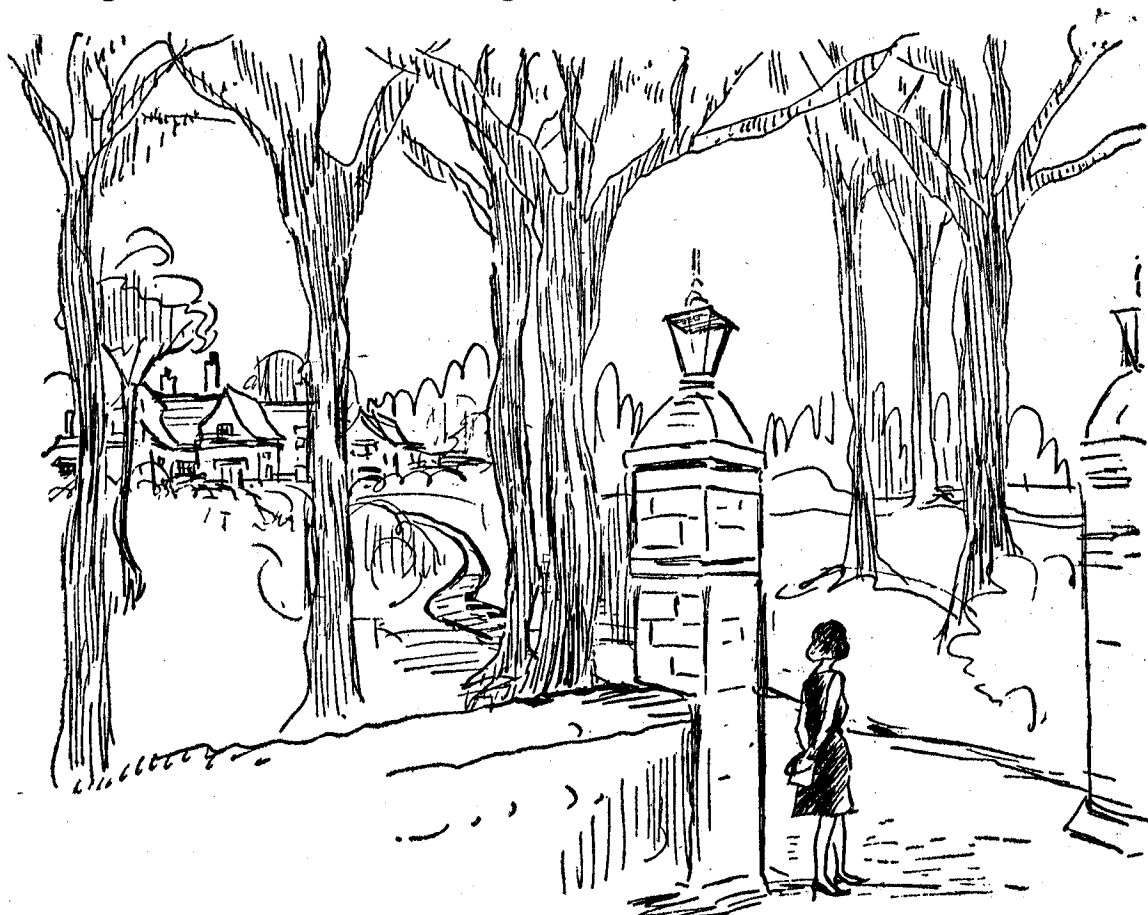
The phone on Magnus' desk rang and he picked it up. He listened for a minute and then hung up.

His eyes were thoughtful. "Benson's dead."

Tyler and I looked at each other. The name didn't mean a thing to either one of us.

"Heart attack," Magnus said. "Went just like that." He puffed his cigar and finally looked at Tyler. "You once mentioned that you had some kind of a degree in accounting?"

Tyler nodded.



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Magnus let things ride for a quiet half a minute. Then he said. "Tyler, you got the job."

"The job?"

"Benson's job," Magnus said. "It's a promotion, Tyler. You'll be the only one beside me who knows where central bookkeeping" He stopped and looked my way. Evidently he had forgotten I was still there. "You can go now, Hagen."

Outside the room, I walked past doors to the front of the house. None of them opened.

I began to wonder about Valerie. I'd made the phone call specifically so that she'd know I'd be here, and when.

At my car, I waited. Still nothing.

I'd been wrong before in my life and this looked like another time.

I got into my car and drove down the winding drive.

Valerie waited at the gate. She gave the hitchhiker's sign and I slowed the car to a stop.

She smiled. "Hello."

"Hello."

"How about a lift?"

I rubbed my hand along the steering wheel and tried to look uneasy. "Car break down?"

"No." She smiled. "Are you afraid of something?"

I took a breath. "No. Get in."

I waited until we were out of

Trevor Park before I said anything. "How will you get back?"

"I'll take a taxi."

"Wouldn't it have been much simpler if you'd just taken your car?"

"I walked down to get the mail. There wasn't any, so I decided to go to town. Flash of the moment type of thing."

"Does the mail come this late in the day?"

She looked at me. "Did you think that I deliberately waited for you to come along?"

I didn't say anything.

She stiffened. "You might as well stop right here. I'll *walk* the rest of the way."

I slowed the car down to about twenty and then stepped on the accelerator again. I sighed. "Care for a cigarette?" I took the pack and lighter out of my pocket and handed it to her.

She lit two cigarettes and passed one on to me. "Suppose I weren't Magnus' daughter?"

"Maybe I'd ask you for a date. Maybe."

"Why?"

"What do you mean, 'why?'"

Her eyes were level. "I have a mirror. People don't ask me for dates."

I stared at her as though I didn't have the faintest idea of what she was talking about.

"Watch the road," she said. But she had blushed, and she was pleased.

I got the car back into my lane. "You wouldn't happen to know if there's a good restaurant in town? I haven't had anything to eat since breakfast."

"There's Henrich's."

After a while I asked, "Have you had dinner?"

"No."

This time when I looked at her, I smiled. And so did she.

In the restaurant we kept the talk small, but at coffee she said, "I wish you didn't work for my father."

"He gives out nice money."

"No, he doesn't." She looked away. "As my father, I love him. And he loves me. But I know what he does. What he is. I'm not a little girl who thinks her father's in the investment business."

After I paid the check, I drove her back. At the entrance to Magnus' estate, she touched my arm. "I'll get out here and walk the rest of the way."

I had intended to stop here anyway. I didn't want Magnus to see me with his daughter. But I made the motions of protest. "I'll take you up to the house."

"No. I think it would be better if we just . . ."

"Sure," I said. "I guess you're

right. We're both right. It's better to say goodbye."

"I didn't mean that," she said desperately. "I mean—just for now."

I stopped the car, got out, and opened her door. She stepped out, looking small and lonely.

It was evening and a full pale moon hung in the sky. I looked down at her. "I like that restaurant. Henrich's. I don't suppose you'd like another lift to town? Say tomorrow night at eight?"

Her smile was sudden. "I'll be here. I will."

When I drove away, I glanced back. She still stood beside the road, watching me.

I got back to my apartment at about nine. I made myself a stiff drink and walked to the mirror. I looked about the way I felt. A little dirty.

I went to the window and stared out over the lights of the city. How long would it take before I found out where Magnus kept that damn bookkeeper's nest? One year? Two?

And then what? Another assignment and a three-figure monthly check?

I took out my wallet and counted the money. Nineteen hundred dollars. And that was just spending money. Something you carried around to keep from feeling

insecure. Just for odds and ends.
But I'd never had that much in my wallet before. I'd never expected to.

I had a good deal going here. Suppose I kept it that way?

Suppose I told Captain Parker to go to hell.

I swallowed half the drink.

There was a lot of money to be made with Magnus. A lot. But there was something else too. Just working for him was one thing, but suppose . . . suppose. . . .

It could be done, I thought. Get Magnus to see me more often. Get *him* to invite me to his house. Like Tyler. Get Magnus to trust me completely. Depend on me.

Make it so that when he saw what was happening between Valerie and me, it wouldn't bother him at all. Maybe I could even get him to think that it was his own idea.

Yes. It would take time. But I could sell it.

And what about Parker?

There wasn't much he could really do except to let Magnus know why I had gotten into the organization in the first place.

How could I get Magnus really to believe that I'd switched sides? How could I convince him? How?

My phone rang.

It was Tyler. "Hagen? I'm at the Carson Hotel in Bellington. That's

about an hour's drive north of where you are. I'd like to see you right away. Room 408."

When I got there and knocked, Tyler opened the door. I noticed a bottle and two glasses on the table.

Tyler patted me on the shoulder. "Come on in and help me celebrate."

I closed the door behind me. "Sure. Your promotion."

He grinned. "I just finished inspecting Magnus' central bookkeeping headquarters. It's right here in Bellington. The front is the Spencer Insurance Agency. The complete books are there, Hagen. Everything."

I frowned. "I thought that kind of information was something you were supposed to keep under your hat."

Tyler laughed again. "There's no reason why I can't tell you, Hagen. We're both working for the same organization."

"I know. But . . ."

Tyler's face became serious. "Hagen, did you think that in something this big, Captain Parker would have only *one* man working on the job?"

I stared at him.

"There are at least a half dozen besides you and me, Hagen. I don't know who the others are, but I was told about you."

It took a little while for what

he had said to sink in. I shook my head. "Why didn't Parker tell me about you? Or the others?"

"Because if something went wrong, he didn't want any single man to pull down all the rest."

"But still he told *you* about me."

"Because I was in a position to help you along. Did you think that you alone made all your luck? You might still be stealing cars if I hadn't been there to keep calling you to Magnus' attention."

He poured whiskey into two glasses. "I've been on this assignment for five years, Hagen. And that's a long, long time. But it looked like I'd gotten into a dead end. So my instructions were to help you along whenever I could—try to get you to the top, and maybe you could do what I hadn't been able to. And then this good thing came along. Benson died. Luck? Sure. But it wasn't luck that I was up there for Magnus to tap on the shoulder."

I took one of the glasses and almost emptied it. "Have you told Captain Parker about the books?"

"Not yet. I phoned his office and got referred to his home. But his daughter told me that Parker and his wife went out for the evening. She didn't know where they went. I left a message for him to call me here just as soon as he gets home." Tyler lifted his glass in a toast.

"Parker will get his squads busy and we ought to have this thing wrapped up before morning."

I stared at the liquor in my glass. No one knew about the books yet, but Tyler.

He frowned slightly. "About this clerk, Fielding. We've got to stop that. We don't want anything to happen to him."

"Fielding died about two weeks ago."

Tyler grinned slowly. "You're a smart operator, Hagen. For a while there you had me worried. Murder's going too far."

Is it? I smiled faintly to myself.

I would kill Tyler. I would kill him and tell Magnus who he was. What he had been.

And then I would tell him who I was—and that I'd changed sides.

Even then he might not believe me—until I told him I knew where central bookkeeping headquarters was and hadn't gone to the department with the information.

I reached for the bottle and filled my glass.

"Easy on the liquor, Hagen," Tyler said. "You want to be on your feet for the raid, don't you?"

"Sure." But I took another long drink.

The phone on the table rang. When Tyler picked it up, his back was toward me.

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ster, leveled it at Tyler's back.
Tyler spoke into the mouthpiece.
"Parker?"

I found myself perspiring. Just one shot and it would be all over. It could be as simple as that. My finger touched the trigger.

And then I closed my eyes.

No. I couldn't do it.

I cursed myself for being a fool. A sucker. But I slipped the .38 back into the holster.

Someday I would figure out why a badge was more important than a million dollars. but I didn't want to work on it now.

When Tyler was through, he turned. "It's all set. Parker's getting the wheels moving. He's even going to pick up Magnus tonight."

A reflective haze came into Tyler's eyes and he grinned wryly. "There's a lot of money to be made with Magnus. There were times . . . well . . . you know . . . there were times when I was a little tempted to change sides."

I pulled a cigarette slowly from my pack. "Yeah. I know what you mean."

* * *

I parked and waited outside the car. The road ahead was white with moonlight.

There wasn't any reason for being here, I thought. Not now.

I glanced at my watch. Eight-fifteen.

Then I heard the footsteps, and in a moment Valerie stood at the gates.

She was a nobody now, I told myself savagely. She didn't mean millions. She didn't mean information I wanted.

And yet I was here.

She walked slowly to the car. "Why did you come?"

"I don't know." Was it pity?

"Everything was planned, wasn't it? Meeting me? Talking to me?"

"Yes. I planned it."

"You didn't have to come back now," she said. "Everything has been done."

"I know."

"Did you travel all this way just to say goodbye?"

I touched her face lightly and she began to cry.

I held her and I knew why I'd come back.

